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ABSTRACT

This paper contends that, because the direct connection between education and earnings is growing, with higher earnings increasingly linked to some form of postsecondary education and training, economic self-sufficiency frequently requires that workers advance beyond high school. At the same time, employers are increasingly reporting difficulty in finding and keeping a skilled workforce. The institutions and programs that train workers must adapt to the different skills and expectations required of the worker in the new economy. Career ladders, or long-term career-progression pathways that enable individuals to advance, provide a framework for lifelong learning. Career ladders begin with basic skills, integrate education with work, and propel individuals toward successively higher levels of skills, responsibility, and wages. This paper outlines the specifics of what career ladders should do for those currently outside the labor market, including provision of a full spectrum of education and training while integrating academic and career skills and knowledge. Building a career ladders system involves imposition of a new overarching mandate on economic and workforce development and educational institutions. These agencies and institutions must begin to develop partnerships that link welfare programs, training programs, education programs, and economic development programs. (NB)

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Workforce Development: Issues and Opportunities

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Introduction: The New Economy

Today's context for workforce development, both in California and nationally, is set by the vast changes in the economy over the past decade. Where it was once possible to attain economic self-sufficiency simply through motivation and hard work, success in today's economy depends on skills, flexibility and a willingness to learn and adapt.

The critical facts are familiar: first, the direct connection between education and earnings is growing, with higher wages increasingly linked to some form of post-secondary education and training. Economic self-sufficiency—the ability to support a family—frequently requires that workers advance beyond high school. At the same time, particularly in high skill sectors, employers report continuing difficulty with finding and keeping a skilled workforce.

If California's new economy is to succeed, it needs more workers who have a range of knowledge not required in the workforce before 1990 in all business sectors. And as new businesses, products and services emerge, both current and new members of the workforce must adjust to new demands.

For individuals seeking self-sufficiency, the new economy necessitates a need for higher-level skills, a willingness to pursue continuing training to stay competitive, and a need to assume greater responsibility for career progression.

Since the new economy requires different skills and places new expectations on its workers, the institutions and programs that train those workers have to adapt as well. The framework for job training and education most suited to the needs of the new economy is that of "career ladders," which provide individual workers of all skill levels with a lifelong pathway on which they can progressively learn new skills and advance forward in their careers.

In this model, every type of institution that currently provides job training or sets workforce policies, including local economic development agencies, workforce development agencies, community organizations, and community colleges, has a distinct role. On the local level, this constellation of partners is most effective when it has a community college at its center. California's community colleges are the only workforce development institutions with the size, breadth of mission, and financial resources necessary to help the state build career ladders. When correctly implemented, those career ladders will link low-skilled individuals into focused, quality education and training and long-term career paths, and at the same time serve incumbent workers who need to upgrade their skills to advance further.

The New Economy and Workforce

The changing needs of the new economy are perhaps best illuminated by the failure of current workforce training policies, which are based on old economic models. Many current workforce programs focus less on long-term skills development than on limited training and preparation designed to move individuals into entry-level jobs. One immediate result of this "work-first" policy that is evident throughout the country appears to be an increase in the numbers of the working poor.

For example, a national study of over 30,000 welfare recipients found that after six months of work, the average worker's earnings were only 65% of the poverty level for a family of three. There is also evidence that those who have left the welfare rolls are beginning to return. States such as Oregon, Wisconsin and Florida, all noted for their success in reducing welfare rolls, report significant rates of return to welfare.

Many experts believe that the work-first strategy—which does not provide workers with basic academic and occupational skills prior to employment— is confining those workers to entry-level and low-paying jobs. Further, a lack of attention to upgrading the skills of entry-level workers after they've been placed in jobs leaves many of them with little possibility of advancement and employers without a promotable workforce.

Taken together, these trends make clear the need for a new approach to workforce development.

Career Ladders: A Framework for Workforce Development

The pressing need for skills in the new economy demands new strategies to enable individuals to acquire literacy, numeracy and informational competencies, and to continue developing these skills in order to advance in their careers. To meet this critical need, many educators and policy experts are calling for the development of *career ladders*—long-term career progression pathways that enable individuals to advance, particularly in high wage, high growth career areas such as manufacturing and information technology. A framework for lifelong learning, career pathways begin with basic skills, integrate education with work, and propel individuals toward successively higher levels of skills, responsibility and wages.

Career ladders are not a single training program or even a model, but rather, a system and framework for organizing and delivering career education on a lifelong basis. Unlike traditional training programs targeted to a particular population or individual job, career ladders are built on the idea of universality,

with training and work opportunities open to individuals at all levels of skills and readiness.

To reach those not now working and those with low basic skills, career ladders offer needed basic skills preparation—the clear first step toward work in targeted career areas. To serve those now working who seek advancement, career ladders provide continuing opportunities to return to education and training in order to upgrade skills. To serve welfare recipients and others entirely outside the labor market, career ladders provide the education, skills development and social support needed to succeed.

To meet the diverse needs of California's economy and its citizens, a career ladder should:

- ***Target high wage, high growth sectors of the economy***, such as healthcare and information technology, readying individuals to achieve economic self-sufficiency in the areas of greatest employment need;

- ***Provide a full spectrum of education and training***, beginning with basic literacy and numeracy, continuing with entry-level job skills and extending through advanced training;

- ***Provide a variety of learning and training opportunities*** including certificate programs, employer-funded training, and degree programs;

- ***Integrate academic and career skills and knowledge***, providing the broad educational foundation, as well as the career-specific skills, needed to help students succeed in the long term;

- ***Integrate work and learning***, allowing individuals the opportunity to obtain an education and develop their skills while pursuing work and a career;

- ***Provide lifelong education and training opportunities*** allowing individuals to return for continued learning and skills development at any stage of their career.

The New Economy and California's Workforce Development System: Key Operating Principles

The requirements and challenges of the new economy are not yet fully reflected in the current workforce development system. In fact, the critical factors in a unified system—employers, employment and training agencies, and educational institutions such as community colleges— too often pursue individual separate programs and initiatives with little or no coordination and cohesion.

But in reality, the demands of the changing economy call for a unified approach to workforce preparation and career advancement. Regardless of its specific elements, this new strategy must be:

- **Founded on Career Ladders** Success for Californians in today's economy depends on continuing opportunities to learn and advance. In place of short-term job training, the state's workforce development system needs to adopt career ladders as an overarching principle and framework for economic and workforce development.

- **Universal** The current workforce and economic development system is based largely on programs that target a single constituency: employers needing upgrade training for their workers, workers themselves seeking upgrade training, or those entirely outside the system seeking a basic minimum wage foothold. This separation is inefficient, wastes scarce resources and limits opportunities for all concerned.

  Employers, welfare recipients, the working poor and current workers of all types share a need for a single system that provides opportunities to acquire basic skills, enter, and move up in the workforce. California's system should create career pathways that incorporate basic skills education and entry-level training for those outside the workforce or in low wage jobs; upgrade training for those seeking career advancement; and continually evolving and flexible education and training to meet the needs of the state's employers.

- **Regional** Many current employment and economic development programs target the needs of a single community. With labor markets extending beyond city and county borders, however, the state's workforce development system should focus on broader regional needs. Career pathways should reflect this larger market, bringing together employers and training institutions throughout the region.

- **Linked to employer demands** Today's training programs are frequently developed in isolation from employer requirements and economic needs. Both the overall workforce development system and specific training programs within it should be responsive to labor market and industry demands, while also reflecting employer-set standards and criteria for entry-level and incumbent workers. There is a clear need for greater consultation and partnership between employers and the training system in developing new programs and promoting employment opportunities for participants.

- **Collaborative** A system built around career ladders is well beyond the scope of any single entity now involved in workforce development. To meet the needs and demands of the economy requires a working collaboration, or partnership, among employers, community colleges and other education and training institutions, community organizations, Workforce Investment Boards, social service agencies and government.

- **Based on coordinated use of resources** Because the creation of effective career ladders is costly, this system must also integrate the many separate funding sources that support workforce and economic development. Increasingly, the welfare system, employment and training system and community colleges advocate the same goal: career progression. But their largely separate funding sources should also support the development of a single coordinated system that meets the common need for higher quality, more successful education and training.

Building a career ladders system

Opportunity and Challenges

Developing career pathways that are the foundation of a strong economy will impose a new overarching mandate on economic development, workforce development, and education institutions. To support growth in key economic sectors, such as health or information technology, these now separate agencies and institutions must develop new partnerships that connect fragmented programs.

Creating these partnerships will be no easy task. In California, and throughout the nation, the critical precondition for creating a career ladders system is linking welfare programs, training programs, education programs and economic development programs together in a single coherent system. At this time, however, individual and varied objectives, regulations, target populations, and ways of doing business largely characterize these programs.

A 1995 U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) report identified 163 federal job training programs run by 15 federal agencies and concluded that they were poorly coordinated and often redundant. Since that time, the federal government and many states have attempted to consolidate these programs and create a more integrated and coherent system for workforce development

The Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998 was Congress's response to the GAO report of 1995. Although the Act fell far short of reforming the delivery of the 163 programs, it did require states and localities to integrate their efforts around a dozen job training programs and encouraged integration with several other major training programs, particularly the employment and training

components of the new welfare reform policy. Coordination was to take place through regional entities, known as Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs).

The Workforce Investment Act, and the regional WIBs created under it, offer a potential framework for building one workforce development system to serve all workers and businesses; a system which reflects the key operating principles described earlier. A number of policy experts have noted, however, that WIA's effectiveness depends on several important pre-conditions, including a clear vision of a single workforce system at the state level; adequate funding; and both strong interest and the political will necessary to back it up at the regional level. All these are necessary to create state and regional workforce boards that bring together welfare, post-secondary educational institutions, training agencies and economic development agencies. Without this direction, states cannot create systems that offer career ladders to all who might need them.

While there is much discussion regarding states that are moving in this direction, concrete examples are so far limited. The current workforce development structure in most states still consists of separate state agencies and planning processes for WIA, welfare-to-work and post-secondary education, as well as separate delivery systems at the regional and local level.

In reality, only a few states have acted upon WIA's rhetorical encouragement to integrate resources more extensively than is actually mandated under the Act. These states are increasingly well positioned to offer workers and businesses a single workforce development system that provides a continuum of pre-employment and post-employment services and assistance.

Many observers believe California falls into the large group of states yet to develop a comprehensive vision for workforce development. California, along with many other states, has not moved to integrate WIA, welfare and education initiatives at the state level. Despite some progress toward integration, the state currently has no overall clear vision, structure or policy for "move-up" strategies.

The Opportunity for Change

National experience suggests that the time is right, in California and elsewhere, to look beyond current programs to the creation of a common system that reflects and supports the new economy.

Growth in the information technology sector, for example, has created potential for new regional partnerships that bring together business, education, community and government in joint development of career ladder ladders. Such a partnership can build on the labor needs of IT employers; the education and training capacity of community colleges; the financial resources of the Workforce Investment Board and county welfare agency; and community-based organizations' grounding in neighborhoods. Working together these entities can

create a career ladder that extends from disadvantaged communities to entry-level jobs and beyond.

There is growing evidence that the new economy has made these kinds of networks or partnerships both more feasible and more common. Economic development agencies, such as the California Employment Training Panel, and Workforce Investment Boards are beginning to incorporate the need for skills development into their efforts and advocate programs that foster more advanced training that is tied to employer needs. Some county welfare agencies in California have begun to move away from the work-first model with prototype programs that focus on longer-term, more extensive skills development. And the state's community college system has recently approved a statewide initiative built around career ladders.

An overall focus on career ladders can provide the now separate entities responsible for California's workforce and economic development with a common platform for the first time. In this framework, it is easy to visualize how each partner organization plays an important part in creating regional career pathways linked to labor market needs:

Employers and economic development agencies can define labor market demands and set training standards.

Workforce development agencies, including Workforce Investment Boards and county welfare agencies, can serve as a gateway to the system and provide financial and other resources.

Community and local organizations, the entities closest to the neighborhood, can serve as a referral source, training site and provider of necessary social support.

Community colleges, which are the state's training infrastructure, can develop and delivering training and education that meets the needs of all other partners. In this role, community colleges are the natural catalyst, regionally and statewide, for building career ladders.

Creation of a regional career ladders framework brings with it new opportunities to link now diverse resources and funding. Many of these sources already support training that is either complementary to or a component of career ladders strategies.

Workforce Investment Act (WIA) funding, for example, supports job training with the goal of higher wage employment. The California Community Colleges Ed>Net program funds new and innovative partnerships, based on career sectors, between employers and community colleges. The Employment Training Panel (ETP) includes new funding guidelines specifically intended to support

career ladders. At a minimum, these resources, and basic educational and instructional support funding, can be integrated into new career ladders initiatives.

A particularly large and important potential funding source is the Transitional Aid to Needy Families (TANF) funding stream that underwrites the welfare system. In California, as in many states, the drop in the welfare rolls has created a large pool of resources dedicated to the ongoing support of current and former welfare recipients.

In the face of national evidence that many welfare recipients placed in entry-level jobs have remained there or returned to welfare, there is increasing interest in using some of these resources for career progression opportunities. Washington State, for example, has dedicated $30 million in TANF funding to the creation and long-term support of community college-based career ladders. In California, where most TANF funding is under county control, there is great potential to use a portion of these resources to help underwrite new career pathways.

The central role of community colleges

In the face of the current limited collaboration among economic development, education, social service and workforce development agencies, an institution needs to serve as the center, or focal point, of a regional career ladders system.

Community colleges are the institutions best suited to this role. With a presence in every region of the state, community colleges have the geographic base necessary to fulfill this role throughout California. As institutions at the center of many communities, they are the one place where employers, current workers and those entirely outside the system can all come together. As the state's leading training provider to business and leading education provider to adults, community colleges are the nexus of the workforce system and the institutions best positioned to connect the training needs of employers with the workforce preparation and continuing education needs of workers.

As California moves toward a career ladders system created from separate and often fragmented programs, community colleges are, more than any other institution, its natural linchpin.

Community college assets that make them appropriate for this role include:

Scale California's 108 community colleges are the largest system of higher education in the world, currently serving 1.5 million students with annual projected growth of an additional several hundred thousand students. No other training entity comes close to matching this system in size, scope, and range of training or supportive services. As a system that offers large-scale training in every potential career ladders pathway—from health to manufacturing to basic

skills to computer imaging—California's community colleges offer the most logical, if not the only, potential base for a statewide training strategy.

Comprehensiveness A unified workforce development system requires as its center an institution that can embrace a wide variety of missions. These include providing the basic education in literacy and numeracy required by low skill individuals; the short-term customized training needed by individual employers; the longer-term vocational training needed to advance in most industries; and, most fundamentally, the broad academic education required for economic self-sufficiency, rich lives and productive citizenship. The state's community colleges are currently responsible for a range of missions, including preparing low-skilled students to perform in an academic environment; providing academic training and degrees that lead to continuing education at four-year institutions; and providing both long and short-term training leading to employment and career progression. Community colleges are the only education or training institution fulfilling all these roles and providing the support services necessary to succeed in each.

Accessibility Community colleges are intended to be open and easily accessible to all. This is seldom true of other employment and training providers. While community-based organizations are often the institutions most accessible to under-served individuals, they are often targeted to a single neighborhood or ethnic group.

Non-public training institutions may offer a comparable range of training, but at a cost out of the reach of many. Community colleges, by contrast, attempt to serve all in the community, offering an affordable training opportunity at $11 a credit (with financial aid available). To increase their accessibility further, they also offer training at various locations in communities, often in partnership with community based organizations and businesses. No other institution in California offers this kind of gateway to education and career development.

Capacity Meeting the training needs of industry requires training providers that have the capacity to bring together facilities, technologies and qualified instructors. Few institutions can match community colleges' combination of a ready pool of instructional staff, dedicated funding and ability to offer scores of courses. For large employers with complex training needs, community colleges are, as one auto industry official recently noted, "the natural provider."

Continuity The capacity to provide lifelong learning is increasingly cited as the backbone of an effective education and training system. Community colleges offer a continuing presence, ongoing accessibility to both employers and students, and links to both high schools and four-year institutions. This continuity, which is inherent only in a large and stable institution, allows individuals a place

to return to continuously, as the economy changes and their skill needs change along with it.

Link to community Community colleges, more so than other education and training institutions, represent a continuing link to the community itself. In many communities, community colleges are a concrete manifestation of the region's identity; a place where the community comes not just to meet its educational needs, but for gatherings, social and support services, discussions, employment, entertainment and information. In this sense, colleges are the logical connection between employers and the workforce system on the one hand, and community residents on the other.

Supportive services Fully meeting the mission of preparing all Californians for the workplace requires an array of services beyond education and training. Assessment, guidance, tutoring, childcare, career counseling and other services are all needed to ensure full access to career ladders. Community colleges currently offer many of these services on campus for all students, as well as supplemental services for welfare recipients and others who are particularly needy. They also offer the potential for an even wider range of services through partnerships with community-based organizations

Resources Unlike many other training alternatives, which must compete for discretionary, short-term grants, community colleges are funded by a permanent and continuing funding stream, ensuring their ongoing capacity to provide teaching and training. In addition to state support, community colleges also are a designated recipient of federal, local and discretionary funds and technical assistance, enabling them to improve facilities and curricula. While overall resources may, as some suggest, currently be inadequate to meet the needs of a rapidly changing economy, there is no other adult training provider with access to nearly the same scale of funding.

Gateway to continuing education For many adults who have left the education system without a degree, community colleges offer a point of access to the post-secondary education system, and the full spectrum of academic study and degree programs. As remedial and transfer institutions, community colleges can provide basic skills, academic counseling and transitional connections to other educational institutions that help adults succeed throughout the post-secondary system.

Challenges

Realizing the potential of community colleges to serve as the foundation for regional career ladders requires addressing a number of major challenges at the state, system and college level. One of the strengths of community colleges is the academic, occupational and contract education they provide to a wide

spectrum of the state's students and workers. While an effective career ladders strategy can, and should, encompass all three types of education, developing a common vision and framework that incorporates them all will require a concerted effort.

This task is made more difficult by the fact that colleges, which face their own internal challenges to career ladders, are also part of a state and regional system of economic development, workforce and social support agencies that is itself often fragmented and disconnected. Putting a career ladders strategy in place will require the support of key entities outside the Chancellor's office and colleges, including state and regional agencies.

Specific challenges include:

Need for a systems approach The key elements of a career ladders strategy—basic skills and remediation, vocational education, and academic education—are often viewed as separate and distinct missions for community colleges. But implementing career ladders requires an overall vision that incorporates all these missions, with career ladders as the organizing framework.

The widespread adoption of career ladders requires a systematic approach that incorporates the key operating principles described above, creates a statewide uniform set of expectations and performance measures for programs and initiatives, provides needed technical assistance, and showcases model initiatives for others to learn from.

Need for capacity building The diverse missions described above are also reflected in divisions among academic, vocational, contract, and workforce development structures and programs at many local colleges. In a system where scarce funding is now focused simply on maintaining existing programs, additional resources are necessary to support colleges in integrating these complementary but often distinct areas of endeavor into an overall structure.

Need for professional development Implementation of effective career ladders strategies depends on supporting administrators, faculty and staff, who must review and revise current programs, curricula and instruction methods to better integrate academic, vocational and workforce education. Continuing professional development is a necessary element of this support.

Need for better regional connections Many colleges are now isolated from the resources and programs of the larger employment and training system, including Workforce Investment Boards, welfare and economic development agencies. Colleges need to work with these entities to develop career ladder programs linked to high wage, high demand employment sectors, and to explore opportunities to link welfare, workforce, economic development and community college resources in the creation of new regional training opportunities.

Need for better employer connections Many colleges have developed effective and robust relations with regional employers. Other colleges, however, lack the employer connections needed to foster career ladders. Creation of regional career ladders requires these relationships, as well as an understanding of the regional labor market, an increased focus on employer needs and standards, and increased opportunities for employer involvement in program development and design.

Recommendations for a systems approach to career ladders

California needs to make career ladders the basis of a systemic approach to workforce development. While recognizing that California's economies are regional, and that local flexibility is critical, the system should draw upon the operating principles described above as a framework for workforce development efforts at the state and local level. Implementation of the systems approach should address the challenges noted above, and include:

A) A State Vision and Strategy

California is a state where key decisions on workforce policy are made largely at the local and regional level. Nevertheless, the state plays an important role in setting out a vision, promoting interagency cooperation in achieving it, and, perhaps most importantly, promoting the innovative use of resources to finance it. Our recommendations for accomplishing this include:

1) Establish a career ladders approach as a basis for state workforce policy

The Governor's Office and State Workforce Investment Board should agree to promote career ladders as the basic organizing framework for workforce development statewide. These and other agencies should direct policy, regulation and funding to support a system that is:

- Based on career pathways, particularly in high wage, high skill jobs
- Universal
- Regional
- Collaborative

- Focused on community colleges as regional training providers
- Built on integrated resources

2) Promote an integrated approach among state agencies

Effective workforce development requires collaboration among training, welfare, economic development and education agencies. The state should work to extend and expand a partnership based on career ladders that incorporates the Workforce Investment Board, the Employment Development Department (EDD), the Community College Chancellor's Office, the Department of Social Services and the Department of Technology, Trade and Commerce. These agencies should jointly:

- Adopt the career ladders framework as an operating mission;
- Modify regulation and practice to support interagency collaboration around career ladders;
- Promote, through policy and demonstrations, regional collaborative initiatives supporting these principles

3) Direct TANF, WIA and other major workforce funding to support regional career ladders

State resources currently used to support short-term and limited employment and training programs can be redirected to fund career ladders. The state should encourage counties to take advantage of the flexibility in TANF funding to support career pathways combining training and work, and, to the extent feasible, to offer services to all individuals under 200% of the poverty level.

The state and the Workforce Investment Board should also set the development of regional career ladders and interagency collaboration as basic goals for expenditure of WIA funds.

B) A Community College Vision and Strategy

As recognized by the recent Board of Governors Career Ladders Initiative, community colleges—the state's training infrastructure—are the natural focal point for a regional career ladders framework. To fill this critical role, however, the system will need to revamp its vision, expand its capacity and channel its resources to support new kinds of initiatives. Our key recommendations in this area include:

1) Promote career ladders as the overall framework for system education, training and workforce development

A career ladders framework provides a means to integrate the now separate community college missions of education, vocational training and contract training. The Chancellor's Office should develop a uniform set of standards

and expectations for career ladders, and channel economic, professional and curriculum development funds to support meeting these standards.

2) Create an Innovation Fund

To encourage and support colleges in developing regional career ladders initiatives resources are needed both to build overall capacity and to establish prototype career ladders initiatives that can serve as models. The state should create an Innovation Fund to support colleges' planning and development of career ladders initiatives that are regional, universal, collaborative and reflective of employer demand; and that present opportunities to build a regional resource base linking workforce, welfare and economic development funds with community college resources. The Innovation Fund should support two kinds of initiatives:

- *Statewide demonstration of high wage, high demand career ladders*

California has a need for skilled workers in high demand sectors such as health career and information technology statewide, and has appropriated funds through other agencies to encourage training pathways in these areas. The Innovation Fund should target these sectors in which there is significant potential for career progression as well as widespread demand, in an attempt to demonstrate career ladders on a large-scale, statewide basis.

- *College capacity building*

Development of career ladders will be costly for colleges already hard pressed to maintain current programs. The Innovation Fund should provide resources to colleges to develop the capacity, both internal and external, to plan, deliver and sustain career ladders that meet the operating principles described here. This funding, directed to individual college areas of need, should support a variety of activities, including professional development, curriculum development, labor market research and administrative needs.

3) Provide technical assistance

Colleges will need assistance in revamping their structure, organization, curricula and teaching methods to meet the needs imposed by regional career ladders. The Chancellor's Office, in collaboration with other funders, such as foundations, should establish a technical assistance unit, comprising staff and consultants from both inside and outside the system to assist colleges in making these changes. The unit should focus on needed internal changes—including linking academic and vocational education—and external changes, such as employing regional workforce funds to support college-centered career ladders.

C) A Regional Vision and Strategy

The ultimate responsibility for career ladders lies in the building of regional collaborations centered on community colleges. To develop these regional

career ladders, traditionally separate entities will need to support common goals, rethink programs and better integrate their resources. The key steps necessary to do this include:

1) Develop a regional collaboration

The Workforce Investment Board, county welfare agency, regional community college(s) and economic development agency all share, essentially, a goal of improving the skills of the region's citizens. To take full advantage of this common interest, these entities need to develop a formal regional collaboration focused on the common objective of establishing and sustaining career pathways tied to the region's high growth industries. Key catalyst agencies—Workforce Investment Boards, economic development agencies and/or community colleges should set career ladders as a regional objective and develop a workforce collaboration around them, paying particular attention to the needs of the economically disadvantaged.

2) Research the labor market

Regional agencies should conduct labor market studies to determine high growth high wage skill areas, and industry sector qualifications and standards. This information can then serve as the basis for a targeted regional career pathway.

3) Establish roles and responsibilities

In regional career ladder collaborations, each partner should take on defined roles and responsibilities that build on its demonstrated strengths. Under this framework:

Community colleges should develop, deliver and fund career ladders with services delivered at accessible sites (such as community organizations) and flexible times to accommodate both working and currently unemployed individuals.

Workforce Investment Boards and welfare agencies should recruit and refer participants through One-Stop Centers and other access points. Workforce and welfare agencies should also direct available funding to support new career ladder initiatives.

Community-based organizations (CBOs), as the entities closest to the neighborhood, should serve as an access point and site for community college training. CBOs should focus their efforts and resources on recruitment, case management and social support.

Economic development agencies and chambers of commerce, as the entities closest to business, should serve as intermediaries with the employer community. These agencies should review labor market needs, solicit employer involvement, develop accepted standards and competencies, and assist in aggregating resources to provide incentives to employers.

4) Integrate funding

Current education, workforce and welfare funding can support new career ladders, but has seldom been deployed in pursuit of a common goal. Regional collaborations can capitalize on community college instructional reimbursement, TANF funding and WIA resources to jointly support the development and operation of college-centered career ladder initiatives. Once a career ladder framework is established, collaboratives should develop a plan that specifically draws upon these sources as the foundation for a regional initiative.

Conclusion

Strong arguments can be made that "work first" approaches to job training will not support individual self-sufficiency over the long run and aren't well suited to the needs of new economy employers. When it comes to the new job training and education strategies needed to enable individuals to acquire literacy, numeracy and informational competencies, and to continue developing these skills in order to advance in their careers, career ladders are the necessary framework and philosophy. The career ladders framework has within it a place for every single entity currently providing training and education or making public policies that govern workforce development. It provides an opportunity for all those entities to come together and for the first time truly coordinate their efforts in ways that better serve workers.

Community colleges are the logical center of these local provider partnerships because they are the state's largest, most extensive education and training providers, with the broadest mission and greatest ability to reach current and future workers. But there are some considerable challenges on the road to colleges becoming the center of truly integrated regional workforce development systems. Among those challenges are the need for increased staff development, better connections to other workforce development institutions, and better connections to employers.

In order to create functional career ladders in the new economy, these issues need to be addressed within the community college system. Just as importantly, the work of community colleges and other local partners in career ladders must take place within the context of a new vision for workforce development and new strategies for implementing that vision on both the state and regional level.

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